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ABSTRACT

A study examined the "oral" vocabulary used by newspapers over a 100-year period. Approximately 8,000 sentences containing about 200,000 words were chosen at random from the front pages of "The New York Times" and "The Los Angeles Times" for the period 1890-1989. Specific vocabularies were constructed for "oral" words (including announced, discussion, said), "print" words (ballot, law, note, and wrote), and "education" words (including college, diploma, education, and professor). These target words were identified and tallied using GENCA, a computerized content analysis program. Results indicated that over the 100-year period, "oral" and "education" words were used more frequently, and that "print" words were used less frequently. What happens to journalistic interest in education when society is oriented to oral communication? Findings suggest that oral communication is pervasive in current mass-mediated society. (Three frequency graphs are included; 18 references and the list of vocabulary words are attached.) (RS)

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A content analysis of newspaper use of language

by

David R. Thompson

The University of Texas at Austin

June 1991

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ABSTRACT

In 1967, McLuhan stated: "The world of the newspaper is mainly oral in pattern." In 1982, Ong stated: "Writing is always a kind of imitation talking." This study seeks empirical evidence of these statements.

Language and its use provide a "public record" of the social symbols of a given time period. The evidence shows: People communicate orally, even in print.

This study provides evidence that oral communication is pervasive in today's mass-mediated society.

A computerized content analysis is used to measure the use of 1) "oral" words, 2) "print" words, and 3) "education" words in two major newspapers.

Over a 100-year period, "oral" words are used more frequently, "print" words are used less frequently, and "education" words are used more frequently.

David R. Thompson is a PhD student at the University of Texas at Austin and President of SENSS Publications and Seminars, Inc.

In 1967, McLuhan stated: "The world of the newspaper is mainly oral in pattern." In 1982, Ong stated: "Writing is always a kind of imitation talking." This study seeks empirical evidence of these statements.

Language and its use provide a "public record" of the social symbols of a given time period. Newspapers are a tangible source of such cultural history.

This study examines newspapers' use of words that refer to an "oral vocabulary" (such as said, told), words that refer to a "print vocabulary" (such as book, wrote), and words that refer to an "education vocabulary" (such as education, school).

Oral communication may be so fundamental to human communication that, in today's mass-mediated society, even newspapers are increasingly using "oral" words in their stories.

Literature Review

McLuhan (1962) describes the early history of reading: "In antiquity and the Middle Ages reading was necessarily reading aloud." According to McLuhan (1967) this oral-aural feature of

words in print has been preserved and is maintained by contemporary print media.

Danielson (1990) states: "The environment that counts the most to us as human beings is the environment of words and images, the environment of meanings that surround us from our earliest moments of existence." Perhaps at an "earliest" moment of existence, aural perception of a vocal sound leads us to focus on a source of meaning. This suggests that speech is a (if not the) primal aspect of human communication.

Lasswell (1948) suggests that human speech is the only form of communication which transmits the tale of surviving from one generation to the next. This involves a storyteller. Perhaps journalists are the storytellers of this era.

Mills (1956) argues that the dominant mode of communication for "the public" is discussion. However, the formal media comprise the dominant mode of communication for "the mass society." News may be the public forum of today's mass-mediated society.

Tuchman (1978) states: "News is an interchange among politicians, policy makers, newsworkers and their organizational superiors, and ... [we] are eavesdroppers on that ongoing conversation." Oral history is alive and well. Even in print.

Wright (1960,1974) suggests an "oral" aspect of mass media messages: "Messages ... usually are meant to be transient rather than permanent records." Permanent records may be thought of as "things that are written" or "things in print."

Apparently, newspapers are both carriers of "transient" mass media messages and printed, therefore, "permanent." How do newspapers handle this inherent conflict?

Perhaps the stories used by newspapers are written to resemble conversations. Perhaps the vocabulary used by newspapers "sounds" vocal.

According to Chaytor (1960), "When we read, the visual image of the printed word-form instantaneously becomes an acoustic image." Perhaps it is easier to "hear" a printed word that is associated with oral-aural experience. If so, newspapers may use an oral vocabulary to facilitate the reading process and, therefore, make the news more accessible to readers.

Haynes (1989) states: "Stories in the oral world are acts and events themselves. The world comes to be known through the sprawling episodic narrative of the natural course of events; thus narrative as experience is implicitly rhetorical." Newspaper readers experience the world through such a rhetorical narrative.

This concept of social experience is supported by Lang & Lang (1989) in their definitions of historical knowledge and folk knowledge. Historical knowledge is direct experience of an event. Folk knowledge (collective memory) is indirect knowledge gained only through communication. According to Lang & Lang, folk knowledge is "highly responsive to the daily flow of news." This suggests that newspapers are a source of folklore. In other words, newspapers "tell" history.

Even page layout may reflect the oral pattern of newspapers. Bagby (1991) states that redesigned newspapers will probably use shorter stories and fewer jumps. A short, complete story may be analogous to a conversation (everything gets said without being put on hold too often).

Finally, how is mass education reflected in language use by the mass media, specifically newspapers? Evidence of education's influence on newspapers' use of language is scarce.

McLuhan (1960) states: "The classroom, as we know it, was entirely the by-product of print." Newspapers may consider themselves educators and, therefore, favor vocabulary related to education.

Chaytor (1960) suggests that oral expression bridges the gap between literate and illiterate individuals. Chaytor states: "If the thinker is illiterate, the images that arise in his mind will be auditory; if he is literate, they will be visual; in either case, immediate vocal expression can be given to them, if necessary." Does use of oral vocabularies in newspapers encourage literate thinkers to communicate with illiterate thinkers? Perhaps newspapers' use of oral vocabularies encourages semi-literate individuals to become involved with print. If so, how does this affect reading and social skills of our population?

Predictions

This study examines the "oral" vocabulary (words including: announced, discussion, remark, said, speech, stated, etc) used by newspapers. Based on the "oral" nature of human communication, this study predicts:

H1. Over time, newspaper content will increasingly use an "oral" vocabulary.

This study examines the "print" vocabulary (words including: ballot, law, note, press, published, treaty, wrote, etc.) used by newspapers. Despite increased availability of printed materials, this study predicts:

H2. Over time, newspaper content will decreasingly use a "print" vocabulary.

This study also examines the "education" vocabulary (words including: college,diploma, education, professor, read, school, etc.) used by newspapers. What happens to journalistic "interest" in education when society is oriented to "oral" communication? This study predicts:

H3. Over time, newspaper content will increasingly use an "education" vocabulary.

Methodology

A computerized content analysis, using GENCA -- for GENERAL CONTENT ANALYZER[1], was used. The sampling unit is the sentence. The unit of analysis is vocabulary.

The sample sentences were compiled by graduate students at the University of Texas at Austin. The front pages of **The New York Times** and **The Los Angeles Times** for the period 1890-1989 were used. A random numbers program selected days of each year and ten sentences were randomly chosen from each day. The compiled sample used for this study contained approximately 8,000 sentences and approximately 200,000 words.

Specific vocabularies were constructed for oral, print and education words (See Appendix A.). These were the "target" words for the GENCA program to identify and tally. By definition, the more targets "hit," the greater the use of a given vocabulary.

The content analysis revealed the frequency and distribution of the three vocabularies (oral, print, and education) as used on front pages of **The New York Times** and **The Los Angeles Times** over a one-hundred year period (1890-1989).

Spearman rank correlation coefficients were found for the data to determine relationships across variables (date of publication and vocabulary).

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[1] Danielson, Wayne. GENCA: General Content Analysis System for IBM (MAC) Microcomputers (Version 1.0), Austin, TX: Wayne Danielson, 1987.

Results

Vocabulary use for both **The New York Times** and **The Los Angeles Times** reveal the same basic trends. Therefore, frequencies for the two newspapers were combined for the analysis.

As predicted in H1: Over time, newspaper content increasingly uses an "oral" vocabulary. (See Figure 1.) This suggests that even print media accept and accommodate the oral nature of human communication. The journalist serves as storyteller. The reader becomes the eavesdropper. Newspapers represent conversation in print.

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Figure 1 about here

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Spearman's rho for oral vocabulary by decade is +.93.

As predicted in H2: Over time, newspaper content decreasingly uses a "print" vocabulary. (See Figure 2.) Perhaps this is a natural reaction to an increase in oral vocabulary. Apparently, easy access to printed material has not overcome the human need for oral communication.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Figure 2 about here

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Spearman's rho for print vocabulary by decade is -.54.

As predicted in H3: Over time, newspaper content increasingly uses an "education" vocabulary. (See Figure 3.)

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Figure 3 about here

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -

Spearman's rho for education vocabulary by decade is +.76.

Discussion

Tuchman (1978) and Barker-Plummer (1989) may argue that newspapers' increasing use of an oral vocabulary is the simple result of routinization of the news process. Deadlines and the need for attributed quotes may "encourage" use of an oral vocabulary.

But, readership may also influence newspapers' choice of words. Thompson (1991) presents a 24-stage model of "framing the news." This model includes an audience factor which suggests that reader response may influence news frames. This model also suggests that language is a factor of news frames. Therefore, positive reader response (such as increased subscriptions, more advertising income, etc.) to news items written with an oral vocabulary may lead the newspaper industry to adopt an oral vocabulary.

Future studies will provide further evidence of this interaction between the news process and language use.

In discussing fictive devices in ethnographic and historical accounts, Marcus & Fisher (1986) state that "the New Journalism of the 1960s ... used blatant storytelling devices to enhance for the reader the experiences of the subjects in its reporting." Those storytelling devices are not described. However, this provides further evidence of the trend toward increased use of oral vocabularies by journalists.

The waning use of a print vocabulary may be related to reading skills. Do literacy programs teach with oral vocabularies? Are more people reading now that newspapers "sound" more like conversations?

How do people talk about what they read? Is there a difference in the "type" of conversation held about 1) a story written with an oral vocabulary and 2) the same story written with a print vocabulary?

The education vocabulary was "flat" until the 1950s. Then, the upward trend in use of education words began. Was this a reaction (negative or positive) to television? Did computers have anything to do with boosting the use of an education vocabulary? Did "mass education" somehow change?

As suggested, how does newspapers' use of language affect the interactions between literate, semi-literate and illiterate individuals? Does an oral vocabulary encourage involvement with

print media? How does newspapers' use of language affect reading and social skills?

Future research will gather evidence for the answers.

For now, there is (as always) a question of validity. There are some words which could appear on more than one vocabulary. For example, "pardon" could be an official, legal and written document. Or, "pardon" could be used as, "Excuse me." In such instances, probable journalistic practice determined the choice. "Pardon" is on the print vocabulary.

Another example of probable journalistic practice determining the choice of vocabulary settled the question over "declaration." Is it used as "Declaration of Independence," or as a "firm (vocal) statement"? "Declaration" is on the print vocabulary. "Declare" is on the oral vocabulary.

This analysis did not factor out the "highest hits." Analysis of the word "said" could be revealing. How often is the word "said" used in this sample? If frequency of the word "said" is held constant, how would the statistics be different?

Readability scores were not obtained for the vocabularies (average number of syllables). Readability scores were not obtained for the sample sentences. Are "oral" words easier to read?

Danielson & Lasorsa (1989) have developed a readability formula for predicting year of publication based on language use in novels. "Word shortening or informality" is one factor in the

formula. Danielson & Lasorsa state: "Modern style my be marked by more informal or speechlike forms."

According to the evidence reported in this study, newspapers are becoming more modern ... and more speechlike.

Summary

Newspapers, through their use of language, provide a "public record" of the social symbols of a given time period. The evidence shows: People communicate orally, even in print.

Oral communication is, apparently, so fundamental to human communication that, in today's mass-mediated society, even newspapers are increasingly using "oral" language in their stories.

This study suggests that even print media must accept and accommodate the oral nature of human communication. Now, the journalist serves as storyteller. The reader becomes the eavesdropper. Newspapers represent conversation in print.

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Figure 1 Number of "ORAL" words in sample sentences from both **The New York Times** and **The Los Angeles Times**, 1890-1989.

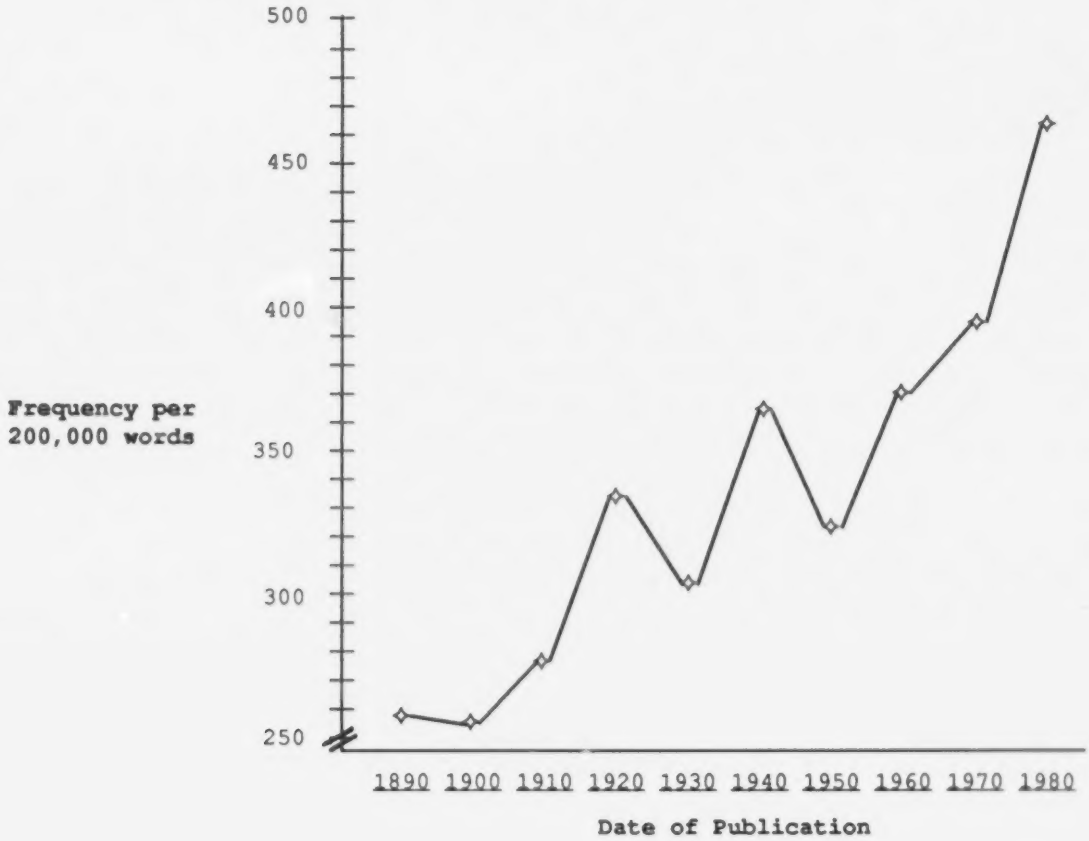


Figure 2 Number of "PRINT" words in sample sentences from both **The New York Times** and **The Los Angeles Times**, 1890-1989.

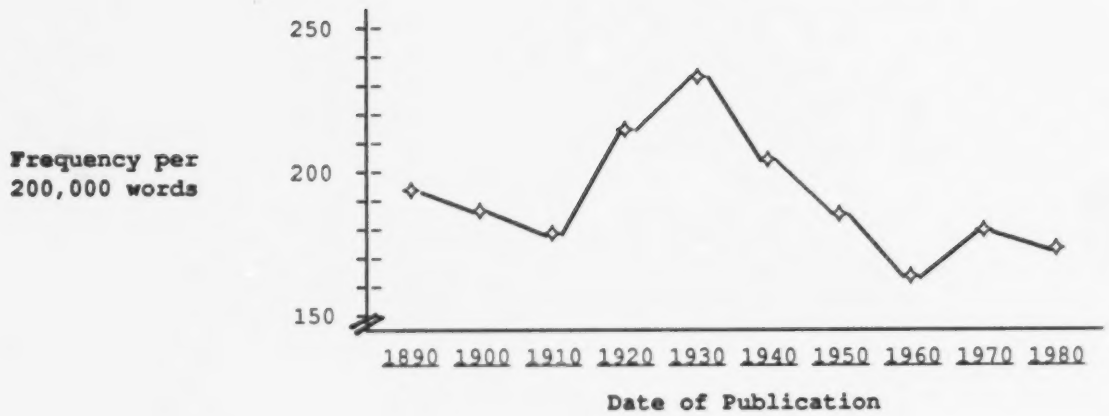
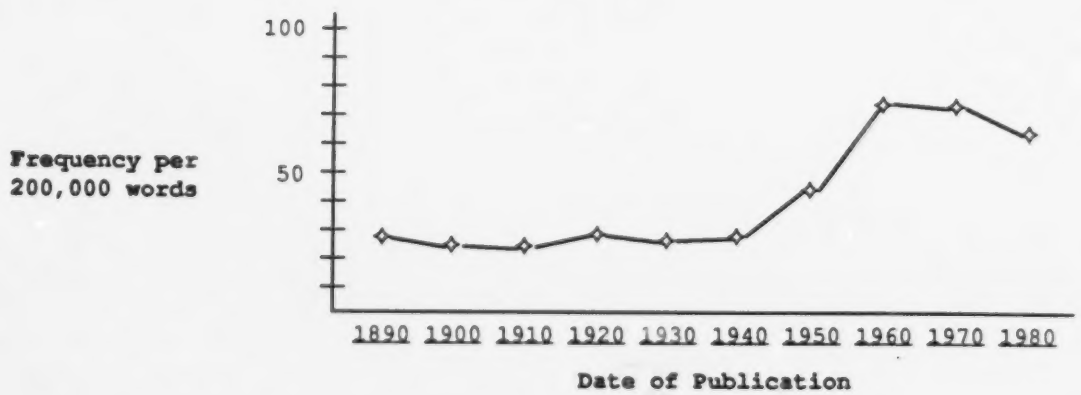


Figure 3 Number of "EDUCATION" words in sample sentences from both **The New York Times** and **The Los Angeles Times**, 1890-1989.



Appendix A

The Vocabularies: Print, Oral, and Education

Key: print = 1

oral = 2

education = 3

3
print
oral
educ

advertisement,1
advices,1
affidavit,1
affidavits,1
agenda,1
air-mail,1
amendment,1
amendments,1
appraisal,1
attributed,1
autograph,1
award,1
ballot,1
ballots,1
banner,1
bible,1
bill,1
bills,1
blueprints,1
book,1
booklet,1
cable,1
cables,1
calendar,1
canon,1
card,1
cards,1
census,1
certificate,1
chapter,1
charges,1
checks,1
circular,1
citation,1
cite,1
cited,1
clause,1
code,1
copy,1
correspondence,1
correspondent,1
credentials,1
currency,1
data,1
decision,1
declaration,1
definition,1
denote,1
diary,1
disclaimer,1
dispatch,1
document,1
edit,1
edited,1
editing,1
editor,1
edits,1
endorse,1
endorsement,1
engrave,1
enroll,1
enrollment,1
erase,1
erased,1
excerpt,1
forge,1
forged,1
forgery,1
formula,1
guarantee,1
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handwritten,1
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headlines,1
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speechwriter,1
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stenographer,1
stenography,1
subpoenae,1
spbpoenaed,1
subpoenaes,1
subscription,1
summons,1
telegraph,1
telegraphing,1
teletype,1
teletyped,1
text,1
ticket,1
title,1
transcribe,1
treatise,1
treaty,1
typed,1
unprintable,1

visa,1
warrant,1
warranty,1
writer,1
writes,1
writing,1
wrote,1
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accusation,2
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admonish,2
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agree,2
agreed,2
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assure,2
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bribe,2
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challenged,2
cheer,2
cheers,2
choir,2
chorus,2
christen,2
chuckled,2
comment,2
complain,2
confer,2
conference,2
confess,2
confirmed,2
congratulate,2
console,2
consult,2
conversation,2
corroborated,2
cried,2
cross-examination,2
debate,2
declare,2
deliberation,2
demand,2
denial,2
denounce,2
denunciation,2
deny,2
describe,2
described,2
dialogue,2
discuss,2
discussed,2
discussion,2
eulogy,2
explain,2
explained,2
filibuster,2
gasped,2
greeted,2
haggle,2
haggling,2
hearing,2
hearings,2
herald,2
informant,2
informer,2
inquest,2
inquired,2
insist,2
introduction,2
invite,2
leaked,2
lecture,2
mention,2
mentioned,2
muffle,2
name,2
named,2
negotiate,2
negotiation,2
negotiations,2
nominate,2
nomination,2
oath,2
objection,2
oral,2
oration,2
orator,2
outcry,2
outspoken,2
ovation,2
perjured,2
perjury,2
plea,2
proclaim,2
promise,2
propose,2
quarrel,2
question,2
quote,2
quoted,2
radio,2
radioed,2
recant,2
recite,2
remark,2
remarked,2
remarks,2
replied,2
request,2
rumor,2
rumored,2
said,2
sarcasm,2
say,2
saying,2
says,2
scream,2
shout,2
shouted,2
silence,2
silent,2
silently,2
slander,2
speak,2
speaking,2
speaker,2
speech,2
spoken,2
spokesman,2
spokesmen,2
stated,2
swear,2
talked,2
talks,2
televised,2
testimony,2
toastmaster,2
told,2
utter,2
utterance,2
vocal,2
vow,2
vows,2
whisper,2
whispered,2
wrangle,2
campus,3
college,3
college-bound,3
degree,3
diploma,3
educate,3
educated,3
education,3
faculty,3
freshman,3
freshmen,3
grades,3
graduate,3
grammar,3
illiterate,3

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instructor,3
junior,3
library,3
literacy,3
literate,3
parochial,3
professor,3
read,3
reader,3
reading,3
reads,3
remedial,3
scholar,3
school,3
semester,3
seminar,3
senior,3
sophomore,3
spelling,3
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